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*French Genre Painting
in the Eighteenth Century*

Edited by Philip Conisbee

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Frontispiece: Jean-Antoine Watteau, *Gersaint's
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Genre and Sex

How did eighteenth-century genre painting contribute to the emergence of the modern discourse of sexuality? Licentious paintings figured low in the period's established hierarchy of genres and, consequently, were rarely, if at all, considered as a worthy aesthetic enterprise.¹ Furthermore, the new didactic emphasis of the eighteenth-century critical discourse on art, which privileged morally sound themes and values, effectively excluded erotic subject matter from the domain of pictorial ambition. Taking this discourse as a vector of modernity, the history of modern art tends to locate its origins in the developments of history painting rather than genre, where sexual subjects belong, insisting on the idea of the public relevance of art as the paramount criterion for its modernity.² The new ideals of privacy, the notion of intimacy, including sexual intimacy, introduced in the eighteenth century have not been given equal attention.³ Whether linked to the ethos of libertinage associated with the waning aristocracy or seen as a market-driven phenomenon catering to the private (and presumably unsophisticated) needs of the newly moneyed elites, the eighteenth-century predilection for gallant pictures has never been considered as a harbinger of anything new, promising, or even remotely modern.

Yet from a broader cultural perspective, the eighteenth century is important precisely because it is seen to have inaugurated a

modern approach to sexuality. As the cultural historian Thomas Laqueur succinctly put it, sex, as we know it, was invented in the eighteenth century.⁴ This recognition is part of a larger field of inquiry initiated by Michel Foucault's description of the eighteenth century, in his sketchy but seminal *History of Sexuality*, as the very threshold of modernity.⁵ It is in this period, Foucault argued, that we witness a proliferation of discourses concerned with sexuality, which resulted in establishing sex as both a discrete domain of human activity unto itself—thus the new interest in privacy—and a concern permeating all kinds of social practice and cultural imagination, including especially the imagination of the self. For modernity, as Foucault declared in a much cited passage, “managed to bring us almost entirely—our bodies, our minds, our individuality, our history—under the sway of a logic of concupiscence and desire.”⁶

Undoubtedly a new art-historical assessment of the eighteenth-century visual representations of sexuality is in order.⁷ Such a reevaluation may well begin with the image of the family offered in the genre painting of the period. During the eighteenth century the discourse of sex permeated the family. What had earlier functioned as a structure of alliance between partners whose union served dynastic interests, secured transmission of property, or strengthened kinship ties came to be understood in the second half of the

Jean-Honoré Fragonard,
*Young Girl Playing with Her
Dog (La Gimblette)*, c. 1768,
oil

Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Collection
of the Bayerischen Hypotheken- und
Wechsel-Bank; photograph ©
Joachim Blauel, ARTOTHEK



eighteenth century as essentially a union between bodies, a privileged site of the deployment of sexuality.⁸ An affective and sensual intensification of the body marked this process of the infusion of eros into family life.

Jean-Baptiste Greuze's *The Beloved Mother* may be seen as epitomizing this new function of sex as the invisible glue of family life (fig. 1). Focused on the figure of the mother deliciously overwhelmed by the caresses of her six children, it is a representation of that "affective intensification of the family space" that Foucault took as one of the symptoms of sexual modernity. If this scene is imbued with eros, however, it is for an obvious purpose. As Denis Diderot summarily put it in describing a sketch for this composition exhibited at the Salon of 1765, "[I]t preaches population."⁹ The husband

returning from the hunt appears beyond any doubt ready to join the "bosom" of his family, stepping toward his wife in some haste, his clothes coming undone as if in anticipation of an act likely to produce more offspring.¹⁰ The figure of the grandmother, leaning with enthusiasm toward the spectacle of infantile affection, at once helps define and legitimize the visual trajectory of erotic connection between husband and wife by underscoring its familial, reproductive purpose.

But such erotic saturation of family life posed some problems. It was not only a matter of "dangerous fusion" that, as Norman Bryson has suggested, Greuze performed by merging aspects of family life that in reality must be kept apart (sex, yes, but not in front of the children), but, perhaps more disconcertingly, a matter of excess and of mobility

1. Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *The Beloved Mother*, 1769, oil
Private collection, Madrid



2. Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *A Seated Woman, Study for "The Beloved Mother,"* undated, black chalk
The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg

of eros that solidifies familial bonds but also threatens their consistency. This excess, evident in Greuze's preparatory sketches for the painting, proved most disturbing in the figure of the mother. In one full-figure study, she is shown leaning backward, like a version of Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini's ecstatic saint, her features dissolving in pleasure, her breast exposed, her hand buried somewhat in appropriately in the folds of her dress (fig. 2). Commenting on the pastel study of her head (fig. 3), which may indeed have been inspired by Greuze's own sketch of Saint Teresa's head after Bernini's sculpture,¹¹ Diderot was—or feigned being—somewhat perplexed by its erotic appeal.

Look closely at this fine, fat fishwife, with her head twisted backwards, and whose pale coloring, elaborate bonnet, all mussed, and expression of pain mixed with pleasure depict a

paroxysm that is sweeter to experience than it is decorous to paint. This open mouth, these swimming eyes, this unstable posture, this swollen neck, this voluptuous fusion of pain and pleasure make all respectable women lower their eyes and blush in its vicinity.¹²

Diderot's indignation about what he saw as indecorous hints of sexual pleasure was somewhat tempered in his response to the compositional sketch for *The Beloved Mother* (now lost), where, instead of ecstasy, he recognized

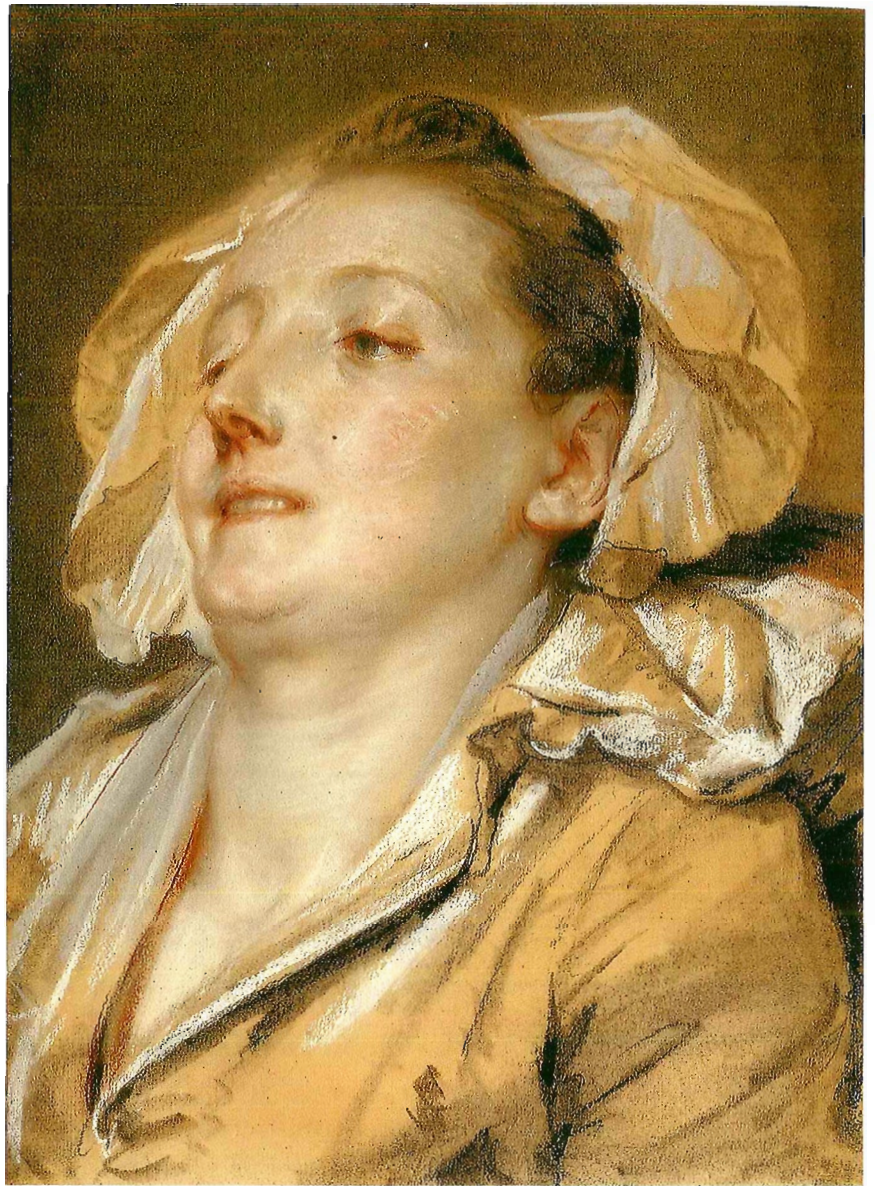
joy and tenderness painted on [the mother's] face along with a bit of a strain inevitably following from the overwhelming movement and weight of so many children, whose violent caresses will become too much for her if they continue much longer; this is the sensation bordering on pain, though it's blended with tenderness and joy in this thrown-back posture suggestive of weariness, and the open mouth which gives this head, considered apart from the rest of the composition, a *singular character*.¹³

Two problems are evident in Diderot's reactions. One is the difficulty he was having with Greuze's suggestive registration of the sexual pleasure of a woman as an autonomous individual, unharnessed by the family structure. Such a depiction was perilously close to licentious imagery, such as Greuze's earlier openly orgasmic female in *Voluptuousness* (fig. 4), which he would have been unlikely to exhibit at the Salon.¹⁴ By Diderot's critical standards, it was fine to use an erotically appealing representation of a woman's body to "preach population," but it was morally unacceptable to visually acknowledge feminine voluptuousness for the sake of voluptuousness, as an aspect of a woman's corporeal experience independent of her reproductive function. Another problem for Diderot was a certain unease about the Greuzian mother's bodily intimacy with her children, which he presents in terms of a burden, even an assault on the maternal body—"their violent caresses"—but which was also visibly a source of her sensual gratification, producing an appearance that the critic could describe only as "singular."

If what Régis Michel dubbed "la Mère orgastique" (the orgasmic mother)¹⁵ proved difficult for Greuze's contemporaries to accept, it was not just because her sensual

pleasure was in and of itself excessive but, more important, because it was shown to be unexhausted by the woman's relation to her husband, the painting thus opening up the possibility that it had other sources as well. Indeed, if one looks closely, eros appears to travel in Greuze's painting not only in one direction, from husband to wife, but also manifestly from the children to the mother. There is a sense of gratified self-sufficiency in the mother/children group, presented as independent from, if not oblivious to, the father. Describing Greuze's sketch for the figure of the mother (see fig. 2), Edgar Munhall noted "the dazed expression, exposed breast, and the vast skirt that anchors her among the bevy of her juvenile admirers."¹⁶ It is perhaps more specifically the anchoring of this woman's sexual pleasure in the bodies of her children that might be interesting to consider. She may be seen as "undone" by the amorous advances of her children, their sensuous invasion of her partly exposed body—all the touching, kissing, and groping performed by the little hands and mouths that seem to know no limits—appearing as the main visible source of her ecstatic abandon. The bed lurking behind this entwined group opens up the painting to another space that announces itself not only as a theater of marital sexuality but also an arena of bodily interactions between the mother and her children, an allusion to the kind of corporeal pleasures that, though innocent, could not be easily accommodated by the logic of familial propriety, and perhaps even to—at least potential—incest.

Incest, as Foucault reminds us, has been part and parcel of the normative discourse of the family. Since the modern family became a "hotbed of constant sexual incitement," incest has hovered above it as a danger repeatedly solicited and refused. It became, in Foucault's words, "an object of obsession and attraction, a dreadful secret and an indispensable pivot."¹⁷ Some scholars have indeed evoked the idea of incest in relation to Greuze's work, notably Bryson and Michel, but only in its paternal dimension, for example, as the transgressive masculine desire for pubescent girls implicit in such paintings as *The Broken Pitcher*.¹⁸ But as *The Beloved Mother* attests, Greuze may be alluding to other kinds of family secrets as well. Ulti-



mately, then, the modernity of Greuze's painting resides not in its apparent containment of sexuality within the boundaries of the family but in its suggestion of the malleability and volatility of eros, which threatens to unravel the very bonds it has been mobilized to secure, the insidious rather than disciplinary aspect of its pervasiveness. Condensing infantile affect and bodily pleasure around the figure of the mother, Greuze's painting articulates the dimension of sexual enjoyment that, while confirming the reproductive goal of the familial eros, refuses to be enclosed by its limits.

The affectively and libidinally intensified relation between mother and child comes

3. Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *The Well-Loved Mother*, 1765, pastel with red, black, and white chalks
National Gallery of Art, Washington, New Century Fund



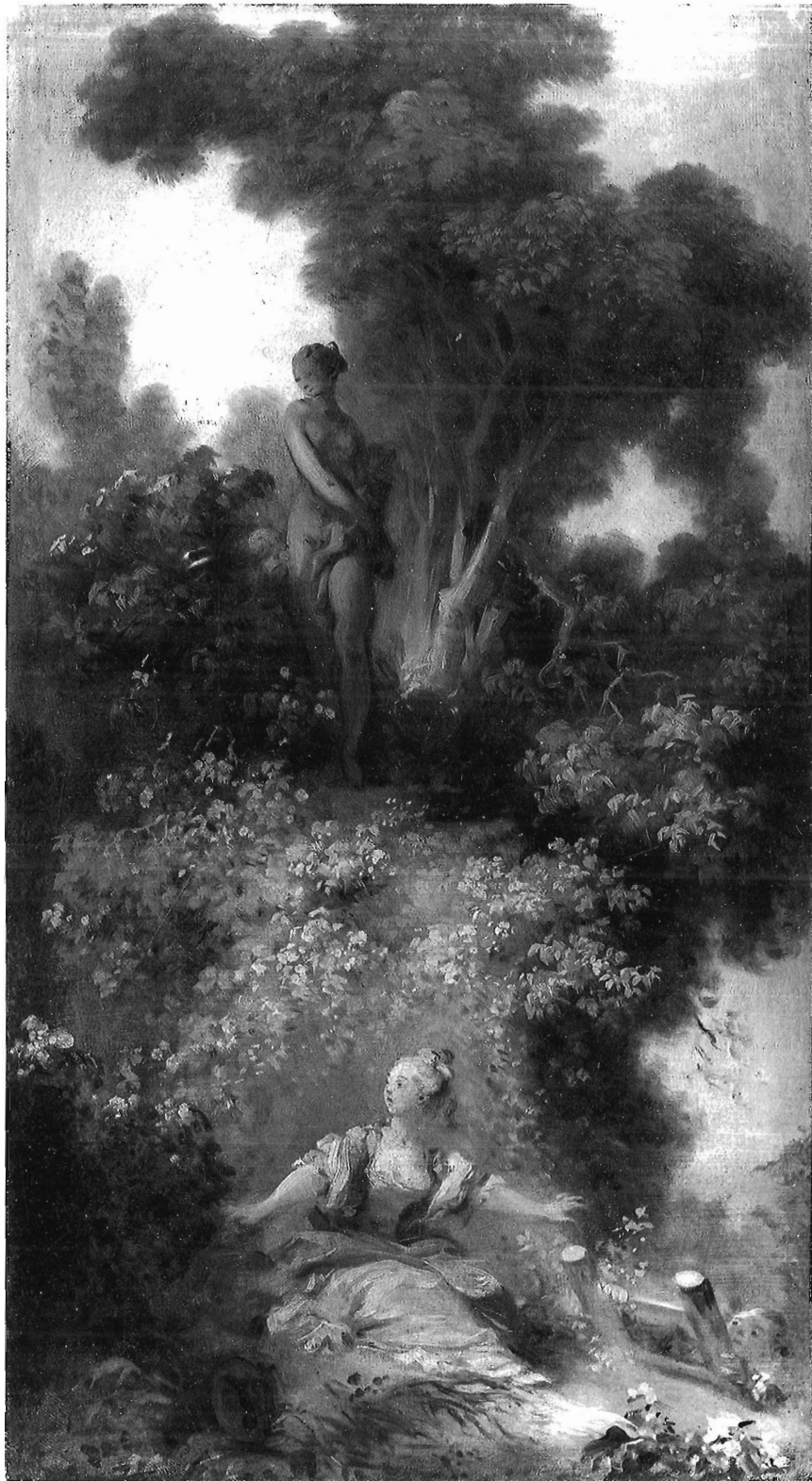
4. Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *Voluptuousness*, undated, oil. The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg

to the fore with a particular force in Jean-Honoré Fragonard's multiple engagements with the iconography of the Happy Mother. Under different titles, images of maternity and especially of maternal bliss are among the most frequent in Fragonard's oeuvre. Since Carol Duncan's groundbreaking study, these paintings have been considered predominantly as illustrations of the new Rousseauian ideology of maternal virtue, though it has also been noted that some of them are more complex in their message than such generalizing reading suggests.¹⁹ In my view, they are not messages "about" the normative social ideal of motherhood as much as they are pictorial love letters, as it were, to the Mother, tactile evidence of an attachment that was more idiosyncratic than what the period's ideology of the maternal prepares us for

Consider, for example, *The Good Mother* (fig. 5).²⁰ The woman tending the children—whether she is a mother or a wet nurse is not entirely clear—is not just the guardian of her charges but a human sentinel at the gates of exuberant nature, foliage pouring down from behind her, flowers spread on the ground, a vision of unrestrained generation, of which her body is but a contributing part. Is it merely accidental that this scenery looks quite similar to that in one of the panels of Fragonard's *Progress of Love* cycle, *The Meeting*, especially the painted-sketch version (fig. 6), ostensibly a moral argument about motherhood being thus framed by the idea of an amorous tryst? With no lover or father in view, it is the encounter between this maternal figure and her children that is implicitly eroticized. Other aspects of the painting also hint at it. The mother's sexual appeal is evident: her breasts, full with a promise of both nourishment and sensual gratification, are emphasized by her corset's décolleté and by the furry white cat rubbing itself sensuously against her neck. But note also the quasi-theatrical display of the infant lying in the crib suggestively exposed, its uncovered bottom up in the air, the crib itself having been raised on a sort of stone platform, brightly lit, like the stage for an erotic argument. Then there is a naughty little boy peeking from behind his hat, as if ready to do some mischief—an avatar of so many other playful youngsters engaged in more or less sexually explicit pranks with older, maternal women in Fragonard's work. Such are the figures of Venus with putti (for example, *Venus Refusing Cupid a Kiss* and the versions thereof, such as *Sappho Inspired by Love* [fig. 7]) or women coming undone by the mischief of the little winged creatures, as in the well-known Louvre pendants *Stolen Shift* and *All Ablaze*, but also genre scenes with no mythological or allegorical pretext, such as the San Francisco version of *Useless Resistance* (fig. 8), in which a young woman, her bosom exposed, pummels a boy buried in her unmade bed with a pillow.²¹ It is the Rousseau not of *Émile* but rather of the *Confessions* that seems relevant here when, speaking of his friend and mentor Madame de Warens, he describes just this kind of unorthodox maternal attachment of a young boy:

5. Jean-Honoré Fragonard,
The Good Mother, c. 1773, oil
Honolulu Academy of Arts,
anonymous loan; photograph
Shuzo Uemoto





6. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Meeting*, undated (c. 1771?), oil sketch. Private collection, Paris

From the first day the sweetest intimacy was established between us, and it continued to prevail during the rest of her life. "Little one" was my name, hers was "Mamma," and we

always remained "Little one" and "Mamma," even when the passage of the years had almost effaced the difference between our ages. The two names, I find, admirably express the tone of our behavior, the simplicity of our habits, and, what is more, the relation between our hearts. And if there was a sensual side of my attachment to her, that did not alter its character, but only made it more enchanting. I was intoxicated with delight at having a young and pretty mamma whom I loved to caress.²²

Like Rousseau's Madame de Warens, Fragonard's "good mother" and the grown-up women engaged with eager male youths in his 'genre scenes are figures of maternal seduction, objects of puerile wanting—not just of the little boys in the paintings but of the subject of desire implied by them in the logic that shapes these works.

It is precisely a male child's look, cast stealthily from the side, that may be seen as responsible for the sexualized definition of the body of the mother—presumably the child's own—in *A Visit to the Nursery* (fig. 9). (In the drawn version of the same theme, the boy's look is directed, as is everyone else's, more predictably, at the infant in the crib.²³) While this rendition of the woman may, as Mary Sheriff has argued, appear incongruous—combining two irreconcilable definitions of the woman's role, as a sexually attractive and even aroused object of her husband-lover's attention and as a nursing mother to her child²⁴—it is actually quite consistent with the logic of Fragonard's maternal fantasy formulated in other paintings as well. The loving gaze of an infant, at once his mother's child *and* her lover. Let us notice that the husband's gaze, and even his body, have been visually merged with, if not subsumed by, the maternal corpus of his wife, kneeling as he is just below her swelling breasts, at the level of the womb, in a position of her quasi-offspring.

What is most interesting, though, is not only the iconographic but also the morphological register at which the importance of a certain kind of maternal fantasy manifests itself in Fragonard's work. *The Italian Family*, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, testifies to this with a remarkable painterly eloquence (fig. 10). A radiant maternal figure with an infant in her arms emerges from what seems an inner



core of the painting, against the bleached whiteness of the door in which some barely articulated shapes hover about. Her entry has the quality of an apparition, as reflected by the reaction of other figures, one of them dropping to his knees in front of her like a shepherd adoring the Virgin Mary in Nativity scenes.²⁵ But it is the formal staging of her entry that is most striking. It is as if, with her arrival, the picture itself emerged into view. The sheer thickness of pigment, its blotchy, fluid application, makes the surface of the canvas appear like a kind of crusted membrane on which things are only just beginning to take shape, as if summoned into existence by the physical pressure of the incoming light. What I want to stress in Fragonard's approach to the *faire*, or the making of the image, is not simply its evidence, that is, its unusually thick textures, but its *dynamic* deployment of paint, especially the movement of the billowing white shapes that seems to push the maternal figure forward into view. Representation acquires here an organic quality, the generation of forms being likened to a kind of growth, resembling the unrestrained vegetation in *The Good Mother*. What presses from behind this scene, and what makes this image possible, is, I would suggest, a certain fantasy of origins that animates Fragonard's brush and permeates his artistic process.



Fragonard is supposed to have once declared: "Je peindrais avec mon cul" (I would paint with my ass).²⁶ It may seem a surprisingly crass declaration from someone renowned for the lightness and sophistication of his touch, but whether or not he actually uttered it, the phrase captures well the key aspect of the painter's relation to his work, made so palpably evident in *The Italian Family*. Contrary to what one may expect,

7. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *Sappho Inspired by Love*, c. 1780, oil
Private collection, Switzerland

8. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *Useless Resistance*, c. 1775-1778, oil
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. E. John Magnin, 63.33





10. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Italian Family*, c. 1759, oil

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1946 [46 30]; photograph, all rights reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

9. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *A Visit to the Nursery*, c. 1765–1766, oil
National Gallery of Art, Washington, Samuel H. Kress Collection

there is nothing phallic or even manly about it. Instead, this relation is rather childish. I could paint in whatever way; it's a matter of play, as in the child's first bodily experiments in self-articulation. Fragonard's statement conveys a sense of amused abdication from the position of manual control associated with painterly mastery, a voluntary regression into the realm of infantile sign-making, but in its very infantilism it also signals an important recognition. I am not in charge of the painting process; my body is drawn into it by the process itself, and any bodily part could do in this blind and driven activity (we

could say, an activity of drives), the more unthinkable—and unthinking—the better. In sum, I do not paint as much as succumb to painting, a mere witness to the emergence of form from and through my body.

What Fragonard's dictum evokes is an understanding of the unconscious dimension of the *faire*, an acknowledgment of that register of picture-making that eludes the established codes of representation and that is grounded instead in the primary processes of the body. This deliberately crude alignment of painting with something like an instinct rather than instruction does not, to be sure,



11. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *Mother and Child*, c. 1775, oil
Private collection, United States

torial effect, a force that both secures the morphological coherence of this field of representation and creates a glowing rupture within it.

Such creative attachment to the maternal body implies a refusal of separation traditionally understood as a prerequisite for the subject's entry into the world as such and, specifically, into the domain of signification, that is, into the paternal territory of language. And yet, as this painting and Fragonard's oeuvre at large attest, it is precisely this attachment that, in his case, enables a different mode of signification, securing the originality of Fragonard's manner—what his contemporaries called “the magic” of his touch²⁸—as the language of marks that tend to hover at the very threshold of legibility, a productively infantile, elusive mode of visual communication. This is to say that the painter's touch is like that of a child who has not yet acquired a firm sense of the boundary separating his body (and self) from that of his mother, and who tends to grope about her flesh with a kind of unknowing sexuality—as in Fragonard's numerous renditions of the mother and child theme, for example, *Mother and Child* (fig. 11), or *The Maternal Kisses*, or *Jealousies of Infancy* (fig. 12).²⁹ In

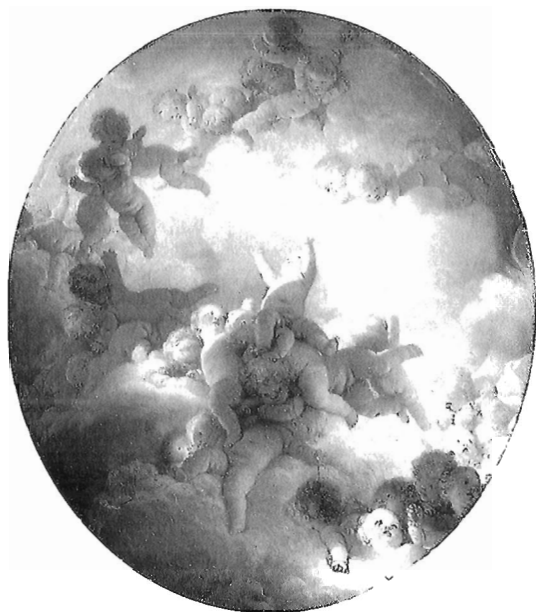
imply that Fragonard was untrained, or that he cultivated vulgarity of expression—far from it—but rather that he was willing to admit a force of otherness, of *unlearning*, at work in his process, and in his body as an instrument of this process intuitively perceived as a kind of submission necessary for an image to acquire a tangible form.

The Italian Family, the promise of an image that has not quite taken shape yet, lets us into the kitchen of Fragonard's process through the back door, as it were.²⁷ Both thematically and formally, this painting exposes the grounding of the artist's trace in the maternal body understood as a kind of anteriority, a luminous “elsewhere” that pushes this image into existence, its imaginary source, of which the figure of the entering mother is only a cipher. The inarticulate density of pigment, the randomness of its application, what seems almost blindly dabbed-on paint—as if by the artist's own bodily part rather than his brush—fleshes out a child's haptic fantasy of its own originary space as the origin of this artistic vision, one that issues from the imaginary corpus of the Mother. In other words, the maternal body reveals itself here as an unconscious source of this image, not in a sense of being its hidden trove or its “secret,” but rather because it manifests itself as a specific pic-



12. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Maternal Kisses, or Jealousies of Infancy*, c. 1770, oil
Private collection, Switzerland

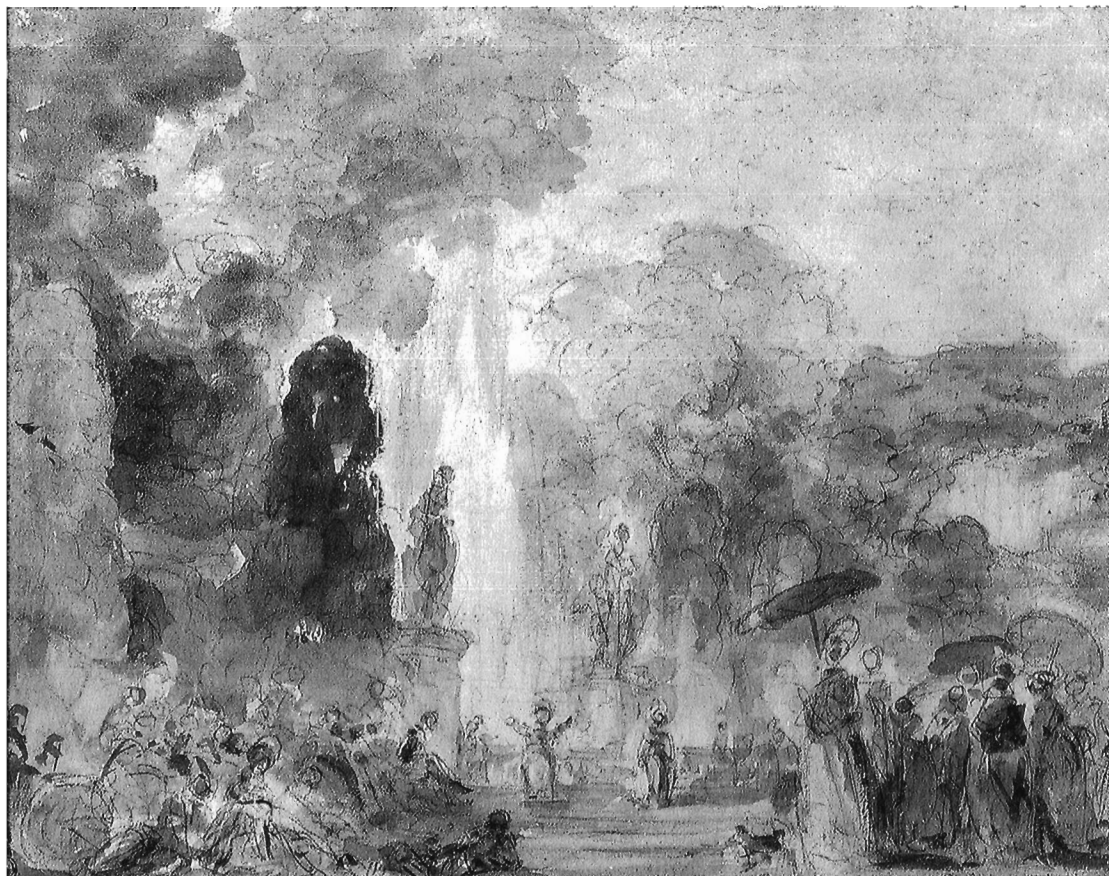
13. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *Groups of Children in the Sky*, undated, oil
Musée du Louvre, Paris; photograph Réunion des musées nationaux [Jean Schormans]



such images, material tokens of maternal intimacy, often very small in scale, we witness thematized a kind of primal bodily reciprocity that underlies Fragonard's signature painterly trace never entirely *separated* from

its ground, his thick and creamy strokes that seem to stick to the canvas, like the child's hand buried in the mother's body.³⁰

Parenthetically, in light of what I am suggesting, it is perhaps not so puzzling that Fragonard's refusal to follow a proper academic career—for this was what his disappointing entry for the Salon of 1767, *Groups of Children in the Sky* (fig. 13), effectively amounted to—took the form of an inarticulate lump of plump putti. Dismissed by Diderot as a “beautifully prepared omelette, moist, yellow, and slightly burnt,” this image, with its thematic triviality and compositional irresolution, may seem a curious choice for the main Salon submission of a promising history painter. It testifies, if unwittingly, to a kind of entanglement of the painter's simultaneously infantile and maternal imagination in the prelinguistic realm of the body, an involvement that ultimately proved more appealing or aesthetically productive for Fragonard than the pursuit of a career as a history painter and the rewards of full academic recognition.³¹

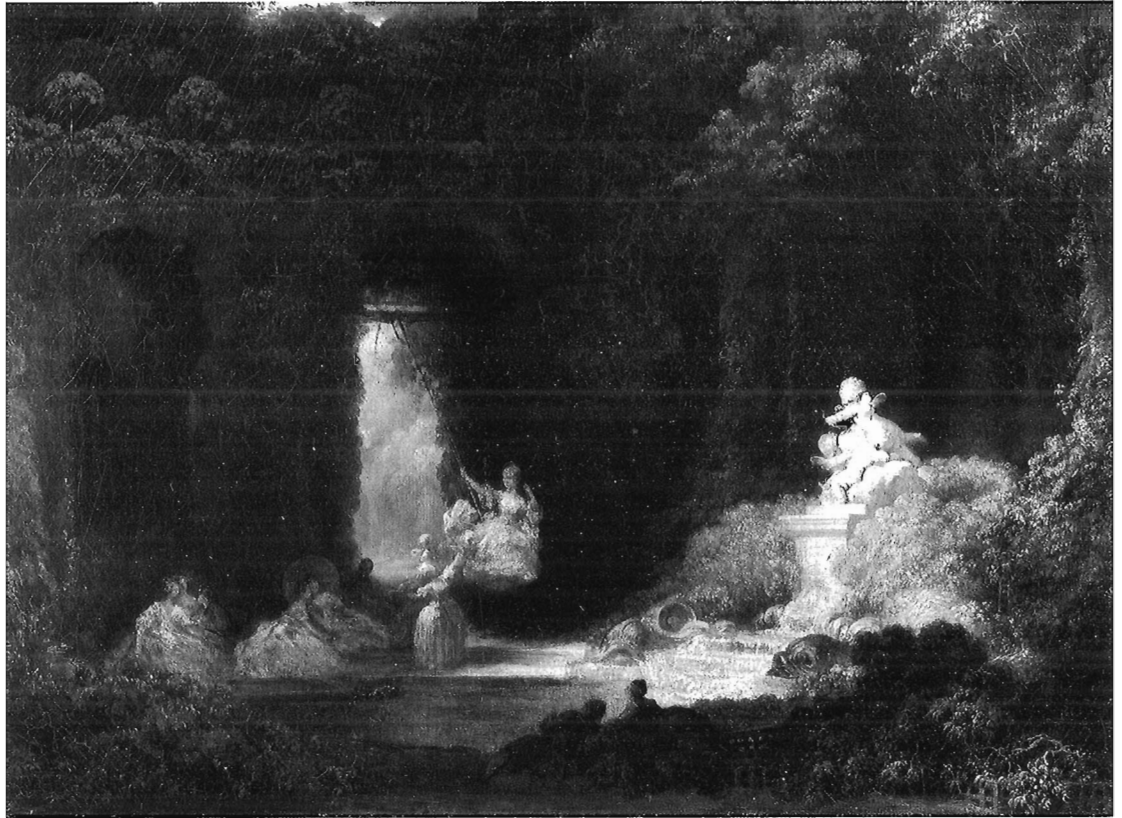


14. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *Fête at Saint-Cloud*, undated, black chalk and graphite, with brush and gray wash and touches of colored washes
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975 [1975.1.628 recto]; photograph, all rights reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art



15. Jean-Honoré Fragonard,
Study for an Interior
Composition with Figures,
page from a sketchbook,
undated, pen and brown ink
Coutesy of the Fogg Art Museum,
Harvard University Art Museums,
Louise Haskell Daly Fund;
photograph Allan Macintyre, © 2004
President and Fellows of Harvard
College

16. Jean-Honoré Fragonard,
The Little Swing, c. 1770, oil
Private collection, Paris



It is precisely such an infantile entanglement in the maternal corpus that we may detect in some of the artist's idiosyncratic formal procedures. For example, Fragonard's resistance to closure, which is manifested in his tendency to keep two distinct modes of description—such as a line and an ink stain—from visibly coinciding with each other, may be seen as a sign of commitment to two different bodies at once. In many of his drawings we see the lines loosely defining the perimeters of objects and the stains of wash that fill them refusing to coincide, to lock in the shape (fig. 14). This *décalage* between the two modes of rendition, in and of itself not unusual in eighteenth-century drawing practice, acquires in his work a particularly fluid and pronounced articulation, the linear tangle and veils of wash creating an effect of dynamic interplay recognized by connoisseurs of his drawings as the very mark of authenticity, a proof of Fragonard's authorship.³²

Then there is the way in which Fragonard deploys line to lasso bodily shapes into existence, particularly evident in his sketches at the earliest stage of definition, for example, one on a page from his Italian sketchbook,

now at the Fogg Art Museum (fig. 15). The tangle of lines here endlessly circumscribes but refuses to catch the object, failing to seal off its boundaries; the drawing itself thus suggests a kind of open-ended subjectivity reluctant to settle firmly within its own bounds; left permeable to the influx of bodies other than its own (The Goncourt brothers' description of Fragonard's drawings as "furious embryos" strikes one as accurate in conveying the connection between these nascent forms and the maternal body—just as they are still unseparated from the imaginary mother, so is the body of this "mother" imagined to be still inside, part of them³³)

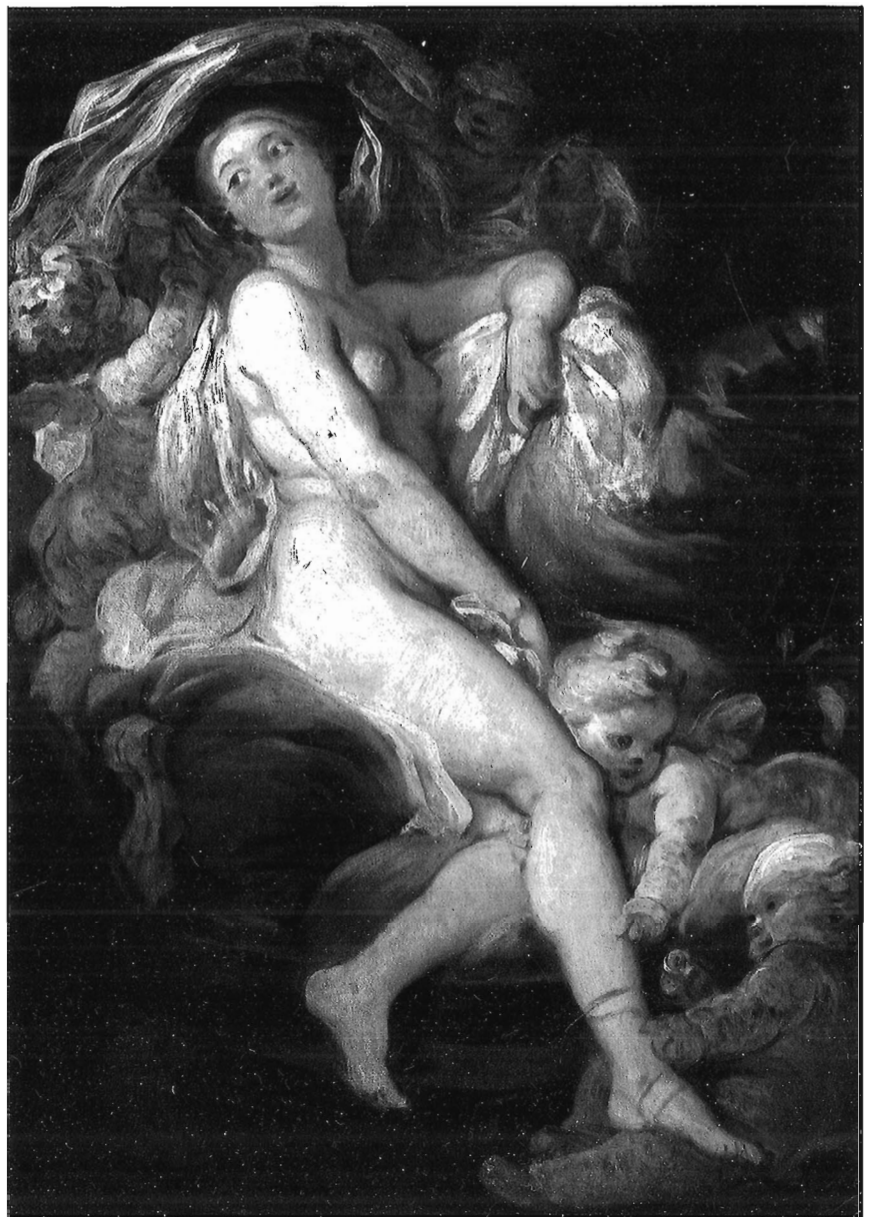
Other examples include the interchangeable function of drawing and painting in Fragonard's work. As Marianne Roland Michel noted, he painted as if he were drawing, forgoing the underdrawing, and he drew in a painterly mode; this conflation of techniques may be taken as another indication of the sense of bodily interchangeability, the perception of palpable physical intimacy, if not identity, between the painter/draftsman's body and "the body" of the image at the core of Fragonard's practice.³⁴ Then there is, as

Eunice Williams has pointed out, Fragonard's inclination to use sketches not only as preparatory tools but also often enough as *ricordi* of his final compositions.³⁵ In its very extensiveness, this tendency to memorialize his own production exceeded the practical need or commercial motivation to keep a record of his work. There was a kind of love in it, a sense of reluctance to separate from a piece of work that the artist liked or thought successful.

Last but not least, what we must briefly consider is the work of maternal fantasy in Fragonard's construction of the erotic object. As *The Italian Family* suggests, eros moves across genres in Fragonard's oeuvre. The compositional structure of this painting is almost identical to that of *The Little Swing*, a palpably defined enclosure with a radiant rectangle opening off-center to the outside (fig. 16). Though the content of these bleached frames is different, their structural affinity speaks of an imaginary conflation of the maternal and the erotic, the loving and the loved, the mother and child in and out of the picture.

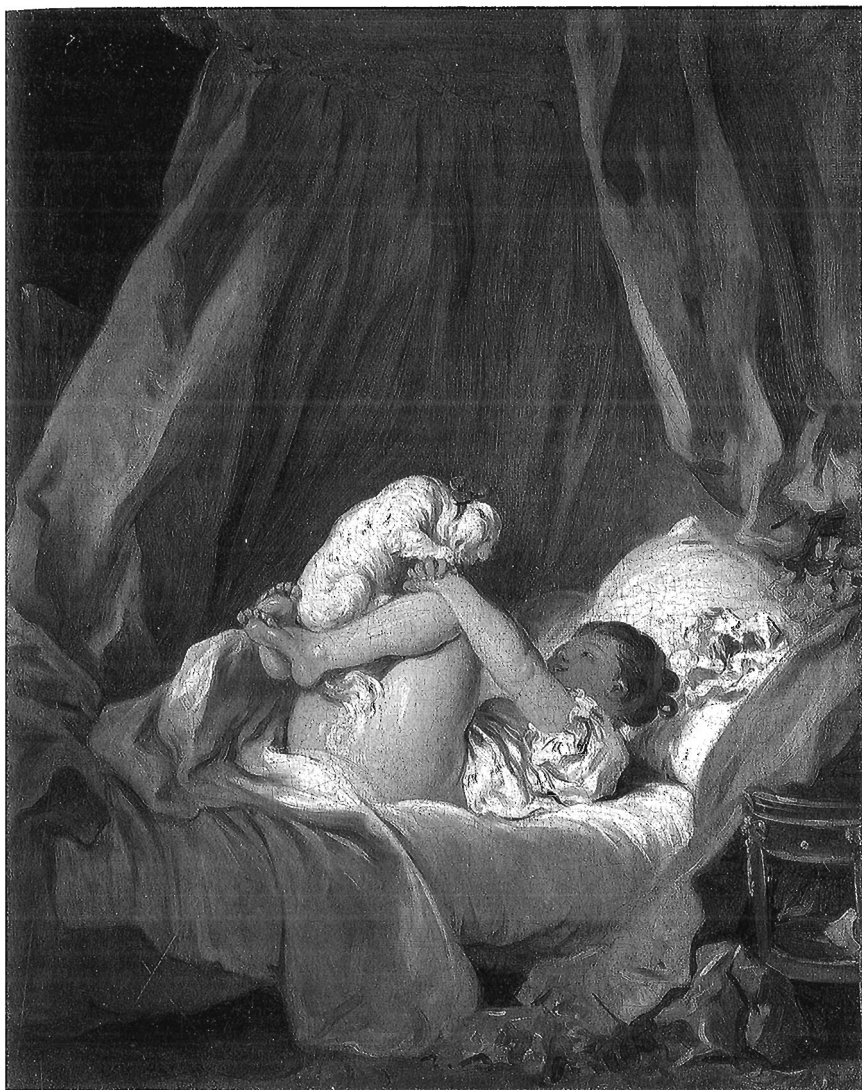
It is the effect of such conflation that we are given in *The Toilet of Venus* where the woman's body is defined as the adored mother *and* a kind of fetus emerging from the folds of an improbable vertical bed, at once the object and product of putti's love (fig. 17). It is also from within the oddly corporeal alcove that the girl playing with her dog in the Munich variant of the work known as *La Gimblette* (The Biscuit) seems to emerge: the large, pliant, and palpable pouch of her bed's canopy resembles the interior of a giant uterus (fig. 18).³⁶ Cropped at the top, its soft, yellow ochre materiality dilating to fill the whole space, it suggests the shape of a bodily enclave in which the girl's own body is ensconced, with her legs bent not unlike a fetus in the womb.³⁷ The erotic aspect of this frivolous figure is thus importantly complicated, a function of its relation to the latent maternal form that precedes and exceeds its effect on the presumably male viewer.

This is an insight we might also bring to Fragonard's notorious *Swing* in order to recognize, beyond or besides the voyeuristic structure this painting sets up, the role of its morphology (fig. 19). Here the deep recess



of the improbably lush, forever growing vegetation fleshes out the walls of a kind of organic interior within which the body of the woman acquires a more intriguing status than has been traditionally acknowledged. It is not only a voyeuristic object for her lover peeking from below (which is not, in any case, the position from which *we* look at her body), but also a function of the dynamics of this space, which, like the swing, propels her forward into view. In this haptic maternal space the depicted men can only half-exist; note the subdued, nearly grisaille tonality of their bodies, resembling the statues in this

17 Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Toilet of Venus*, late 1760s, oil
Private collection



18. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *Young Girl Playing with Her Dog (La Gimblette)*, c. 1768, oil

Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Collection of the Bayerischen Hypotheken- und Wechsel-Bank; photograph © Joachim Blauel, ARTOTHEK

painting except for the visible blush on the reclining man's cheeks, which seems but a reflection of the amorphous pink creation he sees hovering above him. This creation itself—a bundle of creamy textures and whirling molecules—is morphologically akin to the vegetation swelling around her, her erotic charge only a token of the more extensive tactile sensualism of this aqueous space. Brightly lit, a centerpiece of the composition, this figure is a phantasmatic amalgamation of fetus and mother, an imaginary product of the generative power of the maternal eros as a motivating force behind this scene.

Therein lies Fragonard's seduction. It is the painting itself and its painter that are caught up in the grip of unspeakable desire, seduced by the maternal space from which the image

and, in a sense, its subject emerge without quite being able to separate. (It is a vision that could be called incestuous were it not that incest implies oedipal separation that evidently has not yet occurred here.) Fragonard's work is involved in seduction understood as a form of mimicry of the other, as the literary theorists of desire, from René Girard to Jean Baudrillard, would insist, but of a specific kind: a mimicry of mom's interior.³⁸ This is what the dynamic morphology of his paintings repeatedly suggests: a quasi-compulsive attempt to re-create what is no longer there, the missing inside from which the painting's subject emerges and on which it continues to *lean*—the unconscious maternal object-source of Fragonard's erotic art.³⁹ Seduction, in other words, is not just what his erotic paintings are about, but, more to the point, is what secures their existence and shapes their appearance. Fragonard's canvases thus articulate their deep implication in the very space of desire they repeatedly flesh out, if for different purposes and to different ends. The position occupied by the subject of eros in these representations is, then, not an adult male voyeur seeking control over his field of vision but an imaginary infant seeking to reach, *before* language and vision, into the tactile realm of the womb conceived as the phantasmatic font of representation.

In relation to Greuzé, Fragonard's work offers evidence of an eros that is pervasive not only in the iconographic but also in the morphological sense, permeating the artistic process itself in its most basic and idiosyncratic aspects. One may say that it was precisely by eroticizing his technique, through sexual investment of the trace itself, that Fragonard acquired a recognizable manner, an artistic individuality. The definition of the artist as an individual subject—a subject of recognizable touch—was thus tied to the formulation of a subjective erotic vision, one grounded in a peculiar fantasy of self-generation. It is this infusion of artistic procedure, and artistic subjectivity, by an individuated logic of desire that makes Fragonard's work appear modern. The importance of this recognition lies not only in the need it suggests for a greater appreciation of genre painting as the locus of artistic

19. Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Swing*, 1767, oil
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modernity but also in a reevaluation of the ethos of the modern artist for which it calls. That ethos has been caught up in the notion of autonomy—that of the subject, and that

of the medium. But what Fragonard's touch conveys is a grounding of this autonomous self-conception in a type of dependence, a half-belonging to the body of someone else.

NOTES

- 1 On the hierarchy of genres in the eighteenth century and the low place of eros, see, for example, Richard Wrigley, *The Origins of French Art Criticism* (Oxford, 1993), ch. 8.
- 2 This is, of course, a rough assessment of a general tendency in eighteenth-century scholarship. Genre has been considered. See, for example, Thomas Crow's nuanced discussion of Greuze's vicissitudes as a failed history painter and the role of genre embraced by the official patrons at a certain moment, in *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* [New Haven, 1985], ch. 5. See also Michael Fried's privileging of absorption as a quintessentially modern mode of pictorial address that cuts across different genres of paintings in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago, 1980). The fact remains that sexual subject matter has not been considered as modern. For the repression of eros in the Western tradition, see also Hubert Damisch, *The Judgment of Paris*, trans. John Goodman (Chicago, 1996), 61–76.
- 3 The notable exception is Richard Rand's exhibition *Intimate Encounters* and the catalogue that accompanied it: Richard Rand et al., *Intimate Encounters: Love and Domesticity in Eighteenth-Century France* [exh. cat., Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College] (Princeton, 1997).
- 4 Thomas Walter Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 149.
- 5 Michel Foucault, *An Introduction*, vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality* (New York, 1990); see also vols. 2 and 3.
- 6 Foucault 1990, 178. For a discussion of Foucault's assessment in relation to eighteenth-century libertinage, see Jean-Pierre Dubost, "Libertinage and Rationality," in *Libertinage and Modernity*, ed. Catherine Cusset, special issue of *Yale French Studies* 94 [1999]: 52–78.
- 7 Although there are studies on specific artists who painted erotic subjects, such as Mary Sheriff's book on Fragonard—*Fragonard: Art and Eroticism* (Chicago, 1990)—and studies of relevant notions such as Carol Duncan's discussion of representations of pleasure in her Ph.D. dissertation, "The Persistence and Re-emergence of the Rococo in French Romantic Painting" (Columbia University, 1969)—there is as yet no specific study devoted to the issue of sexuality. For a discussion of this issue, see also my "Fragonard in Detail," *Differences* 14, no. 3 [2003]: 34–56.
- 8 Foucault 1990, 1:106–107. See also Jacques Revel et al., "Forms of Privatization," in *Passions of the Renaissance*, ed. Roger Chartier, vol. 3 of *A History of Private Life*, ed. Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 207–263.
- 9 Denis Diderot, *The Salon of 1765 and Notes on Painting*, vol. 1 of *Diderot on Art*, ed. and trans. John Goodman (New Haven, 1995), 106.
- 10 Mark Ledbury took this figure as the epitome of the parodic dimension of Greuze's painting. See his *Sedaine, Greuze, and the Boundaries of Genre*, *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 380 (Oxford, 2000), 165.
- 11 *Head of a Woman Leaning Back to the Left*, State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg. See Edgar Munhall, *Greuze the Draftsman* [exh. cat., The Frick Collection] (London, 2002), 58–59, cat. 9. See also London 2002, 126–127, cat. 39, for Greuze's related *Head of a Sleeping Woman (Anne-Gabrielle Babuti)*, and 145–147, cat. 47, for *Head of a Woman*, a sketch for Greuze's painting of *Voluptuousness* (two versions of which are extant, one in the State Hermitage Museum and the other in a private collection).
- 12 Diderot 1995, 1:102–103. In his descriptions Diderot confuses no. 114, *A Head in Pastel*, and no. 115, *A Portrait of Madame Greuze*. It is under no. 115 that he describes *A Head in Pastel*. I have slightly altered Goodman's translation.
- 13 Diderot 1995, 1:105 (my italics).
- 14 London 2002, 145–147, cat. 47.
- 15 Régis Michel, *Posséder et Détruire. stratégies sexuelles dans l'art d'Occident* (Paris, 2000), 103.
- 16 London 2002, 128–129, cat. 40.
- 17 Foucault 1990, 1:109.
- 18 Bryson speaks of Greuze's lack of self-consciousness about being a Humbert Humbert of painting with his sexually charged images of teenage girls. See Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge, 1983), 137. Michel speaks of paternal incest as a principle governing Greuze's oeuvre as such; see Michel 2000, 94–107.

19. Carol Duncan, "Happy Mothers and Other New Ideas in French Art," *Art Bulletin* 55 (1973): 570–583. See also Mary Sheriff's critique of Duncan's argument in "Fragonard's Erotic Mothers and the Politics of Reproduction," in *Eroticism and the Body Politic*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Baltimore, 1991), 14–40.
20. Private collection, Switzerland. See Pierre Rosenberg, *Fragonard* [exh. cat., The Metropolitan Museum of Art] (New York, 1988), 335–336, cat. 159; and Jean Montague Massengale, *Jean-Honoré Fragonard* (New York, 1993), 100. Another version of this painting is at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, though its attribution has been disputed. (See Rosenberg for the debate: in his entry it is merely "attributed to Fragonard.") Fragonard's gouache of the same composition was shown at the Salon de la Correspondance in 1781. Rosenberg believes that it was the private-collection version of the painting that served as the model for Nicolas Delaunay's engraving of 1779, titled *The Good Mother*.
21. For *Venus Refusing Cupid a Kiss*, see Jean Pierre Cuzin, *Fragonard: Life and Work: Complete Catalogue of the Oil Paintings* (New York, 1988), 303, cat. 222, where it is dated c. 1772; and Massengale 1993, 78, who dates it to the 1760s [reproduced in color]. Cuzin lists four different versions of this painting, titled either *Sappho Inspired by Cupid* or *Muse and Cupid*, all in private collections; see Cuzin 1988, 328–329, cat. 355–358. For the pendants, see New York 1988, 161–163, cat. 72–73. For *Useless Resistance*, see Cuzin 1988, 317–318, cat. 305, and New York 1988, 310, where Rosenberg mentions it briefly in relation to *Happy Moment*. He also reproduces Nicolas-François Regnault's engraving of it (Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris). Regnault's print changes this arrangement considerably by introducing two allegorical putti instead of the figure of a young boy.
22. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, trans. J. M. Cohen (London, 1953), 106–107 (bk. 3).
23. See Cuzin 1988, 91, pl. 119.
24. Sheriff 1991.
25. A position not unlike that of one of the shepherds in Fragonard's *Adoration of the Shepherds* (Musée du Louvre, Paris); see New York 1988, 478–479, cat. 234. The point in noting this similarity is not to say that the genre scene depicted in *The Italian Family* is suffused with religious overtones—as does Massengale (1993, 62)—but rather that both scenes share the ethos of adoration of the figure of the mother with a child.
26. Quoted in Jules Renouvier, *Histoire de l'art pendant la Révolution* (Paris, 1863), 1167.
27. We may note that there is another, somewhat more articulated, if still sketchy, version of this scene in a private collection in Paris. See Cuzin 1988, 273–274, cat. 75.
28. "M. Fragonard has the particular advantage of not appearing to be the imitator of any great Painter," wrote Élie Fréron in *Année littéraire* of 1765, as quoted by Rosenberg in New York 1988, 151. In his *Guide des amateurs et des étrangers voyageurs à Paris* (Paris, 1786), 1.189, L. V. Thiéry lauded Fragonard's *Visitation* for its "magical execution [that] cannot be too highly praised"; quoted in New York 1988, 473, cat. 231. See also Rosenberg's discussion of Fragonard's technique in his "Fragonard, a 'Figure de Fantaisie,'" in New York 1988, 19–22.
29. See also *Young Mother and Her Child*, now in the Musée des beaux-arts in Besançon, dated 1775–1778 in Cuzin 1988, 317, cat. 304; for two versions of *Maternal Kisses, or the Jealousies of Infancy*, see Cuzin 1988, 297, cat. 197–198. Children are here interchangeable with lovers, or pets, as other compositions suggest; see Cuzin 1988, 297–298, cat. 199–201. What matters is a kind of touch, applied to the maternal body, that is infantile and unknowing in its sensuousness.
30. To be sure, what I am talking about is not a biographical issue—whether it be the painter's relation to his own mother (of which we know nothing), or his relation to his wife, whose pregnancy and child-bearing are sometimes thought to have inspired his repeated engagements with maternal iconography—but a formal one, an approach to the painting process evident in this and other of his works.
31. The artist stopped exhibiting afterward and was nagged by the Royal Academy to finalize his membership by painting the piece required for acceptance, which he endlessly postponed before ultimately giving it up altogether. See Rosenberg, "Fragonard, a 'Figure de Fantaisie,'" in New York 1988, 22–25, and Sheriff 1990, ch. 1. Though there is no definite proof for it (the canvas being undated), it is generally assumed that the *Group* was the painting exhibited at the Salon of 1767. See Rosenberg in New York 1988, 229–231, cat. 109.
32. I am grateful to both Perrin Stein, the curator of drawings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Eunice Williams, an established Fragonard expert, for this information.
33. Jules and Edmond de Goncourt, *French Eighteenth-Century Painters*, trans. Robin Ironside, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1981), 289.

34. Marianne Roland Michel, "Fragonard, ou la peinture dessinée," *Le Dessin français au XVIIIe siècle* (Fribourg, Switzerland, 1987), 196–214.

35. See Eunice Williams, *Drawings by Fragonard in North American Collections* [exh. cat., National Gallery of Art] (Washington, 1978); and New York 1988, 23. There has been some confusion about the status of such sketches, often mistaken for preparatory works, but, in fact, they served to memorialize his own production. The reasons for making them may have something to do with the way in which Fragonard's family-run studio operated. These *ricordi* served as a means of reproduction or as tools to assist those who made copies of his work; see J. Wilhelm, "Fragonard eut-il un atelier?" *Médecine de France* 25 (1951): 17–28. But there were far more sketches and memories than would have been needed for such a purpose. In other words, neither studio needs nor financial purposes explain his practice of making such replicas.

36. This is the title by which the painting is usually known, though the Munich girl emphatically lacks the *gimblette* (round biscuit) that girls in other versions hold in their hands; see New York 1988, 232–235, cat. 110.

37. One of the nineteenth-century commentators offered a relevant recognition of Fragonard's erotic body as an incipient babylike form when he described the rosy pink in which it was rendered as the color of the "dawn of life", quoted in New York 1988, 235, cat. 110. The Goncourt brothers also spoke of Fragonard "tumb[ing] his milky forms hardly touched with pink." Goncourt 1981, 287.

38. René Girard, "From Mimetic Desire to the Monstrous Double," *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, 1977), 143–168. Jean Baudrillard stressed the mimetic aspects of seduction in *De la séduction* (Paris, 1979). For the application of this understanding of seduction to eighteenth-century literature, see Pierre Saint-Amand, *The Libertine's Progress: Seduction in the Eighteenth-Century French Novel*, trans. Jennifer Curtiss Gage (Hanover, 1994). For the development of this part of my argument in relation to Fragonard's work, see Lajer-Burcharth 2003.

39. For the notion of the "object-source," see Jean Laplanche, *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*, trans. David Macey (Oxford, 1989), esp. 144–151.